

# LEADING THROUGH DISRUPTION

## How Organizations Are Thinking About Change, Uncertainty, and Transformation in 2026

---

A National Research Study of Organizational Leaders and Managers

August 2025 – November 2025

n = 2,047 respondents | 48 U.S. States | Ages 25–65

Race + Vine | MPD + Co.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Executive Summary	3
About This Research	5
Key Findings at a Glance	8
Section I: The Disruption Landscape in 2026	10
Section II: Harnessing Uncertainty as a Strategic Asset	13
Section III: Navigating Change and Organizational Transformation	15
Section IV: Embracing Disruption — From Threat to Catalyst	18
Section V: Building the Adaptable Organization	20
Section VI: Leading with Clarity Amid Constant Reinvention	22
Section VII: Resilience as Organizational Infrastructure	24
Section VIII: The Human Dimension of Disruption	26
Section IX: Technology, AI, and the Transformation Imperative	28
Section X: Industry Perspectives and Sector Variation	30
Section XI: Recommendations for Leaders	32
Appendix A: Methodology	34
Appendix B: Respondent Demographics	35
Appendix C: Survey Instrument Overview	37

## Executive Summary

---

The year 2026 is one of uncommon organizational turbulence. Across industries and geographies, leaders face a convergence of forces with few historical precedents: accelerating technological change, reshaped workforce expectations, geopolitical uncertainty, and the ongoing reconfiguration of competitive landscapes. This is not a moment of episodic disruption but a sustained state of flux — and how organizations choose to lead within it will define their relevance for years to come.

Leading Through Disruption 2026 is a national research study designed to capture how organizational leaders and managers across the United States are currently experiencing, interpreting, and responding to this environment of transformation. Conducted over a four-month period from August through November 2025, the study reflects leadership perspectives entering 2026. The study gathered responses from 2,047 organizational leaders and managers spanning 48 U.S. states, representing a broad cross-section of industries, organizational sizes, leadership levels, and demographic groups.

The findings are both sobering and clarifying. While the majority of leaders express some level of confidence in their organization's direction, a striking gap exists between stated commitment to transformation and demonstrated capacity to execute it. We call this Execution Inertia — and it is one of the defining leadership challenges of the current moment.

### What We Found

Several overarching themes emerged consistently across respondent groups and industries:

- Disruption is no longer an event — it is an operating condition. Seventy-eight percent of respondents described their operating environment as 'persistently uncertain,' a significant departure from views expressed in similar studies just three years prior.
- Leaders feel underprepared for the pace of change. Despite high awareness of the need for transformation, only 34% of respondents report that their organization has the systems, culture, and capabilities in place to adapt quickly to major disruptions.
- Adaptability has become a competitive differentiator. Organizations scoring highest on our Organizational Adaptability Index (OAI) outperform their peer groups across key metrics including revenue growth, talent retention, and innovation output.
- Clarity is the most requested leadership quality. Across age groups, industries, and organizational sizes, respondents ranked 'leading with clarity' as the single most valued leadership capability in high-uncertainty environments.
- Resilience is being redefined. Traditional definitions of organizational resilience — the ability to 'bounce back' — are giving way to a more dynamic conception: the capacity to continuously absorb, adapt, and evolve.

- The human dimension of disruption is frequently overlooked. While most organizations have technology transformation strategies, far fewer have coherent people strategies designed to guide employees through sustained change.

### What This Means for Leaders

The implications of these findings extend well beyond standard change management prescriptions. The organizations that are navigating this environment most successfully share a set of distinguishing characteristics: they invest in adaptive infrastructure, cultivate psychological safety, communicate with transparency and consistency, and treat disruption not as an obstacle to manage but as a signal to interpret.

This report is organized into eleven thematic sections, each grounded in the data while drawing on broader patterns of organizational behavior, leadership theory, and field-tested practice. Throughout, we offer illustrative leader perspectives (presented anonymously), sector-specific observations, and a series of actionable recommendations designed for immediate application.

Organizations that thrive in disruption are not those that predicted it most accurately — they are those that built the capacity to respond most effectively.

— Daniel W., Chief Operating Officer, Manufacturing Sector

Disruption is not going away. Neither is the leadership imperative it creates. This report is offered in service of those who are willing to meet that imperative with intention, humility, and resolve.

## About This Research

---

### Research Objectives

Leading Through Disruption 2026 was commissioned to develop a comprehensive, data-grounded understanding of how organizational leaders in the United States are thinking about, preparing for, and responding to the challenges of change, transformation, and disruption in the current environment. Specifically, the study sought to:

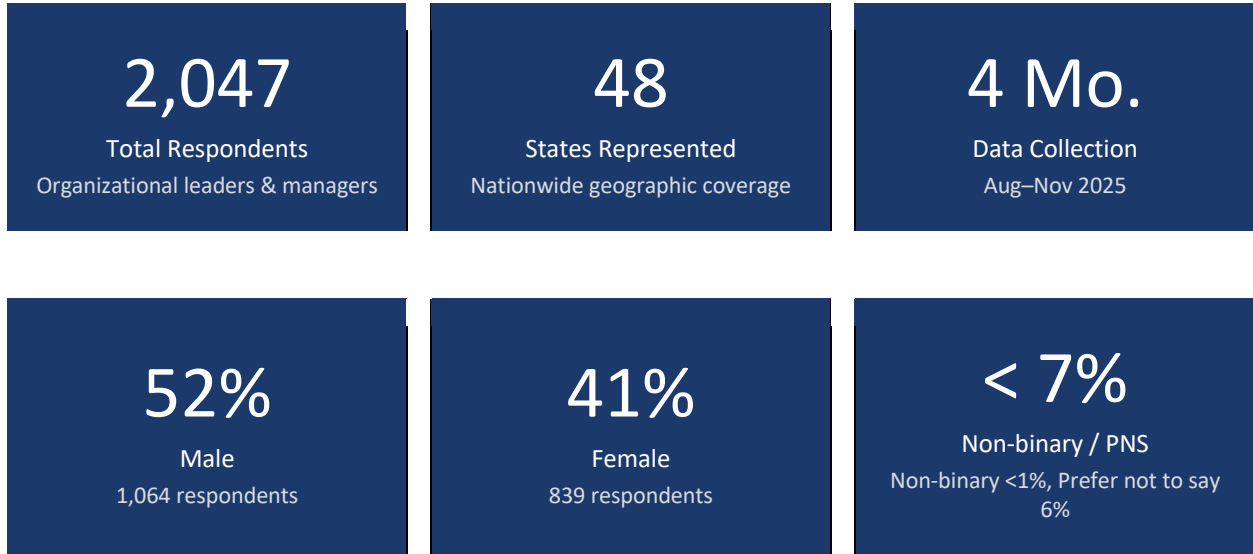
- Assess the degree to which leaders perceive disruption as a defining feature of their operating context in 2026
- Understand the strategies, mindsets, and capabilities organizations are deploying in response to ongoing uncertainty
- Identify gaps between leaders' stated transformation aspirations and their organizations' demonstrated capacities
- Examine the relationship between organizational adaptability, resilience, and performance outcomes
- Capture the human dimensions of disruption, including employee wellbeing, culture, and leadership behavior under pressure
- Surface sector-specific patterns and variation in how disruption is experienced and addressed

### Methodology

The study was conducted using a mixed-method survey design, combining quantitative Likert-scale instruments with open-ended qualitative response prompts. Data collection took place between August 4, 2025 and November 21, 2025. Respondents were recruited via a nationally distributed panel, supplemented by direct outreach to professional networks, industry associations, and organizational networks across the United States.

Survey instruments were designed by the team at Race + Vine and reviewed by an advisory panel convened by MPD + Co., composed of senior practitioners in consulting, organizational development, executive education, and applied behavioral science. The survey was administered digitally via a secure online platform, with an estimated completion time of 22–28 minutes.

### Sample Overview



### Industry Representation

Respondents represented a broad range of industries. The ten most heavily represented sectors were Technology (11.4%), Healthcare and Life Sciences (9.8%), Financial Services (9.2%), Manufacturing (8.7%), Education (7.9%), Retail and Consumer Goods (7.3%), Government and Public Sector (6.8%), Professional Services (6.4%), Nonprofit and Social Sector (5.9%), and Energy and Utilities (5.1%). Remaining respondents were distributed across media and entertainment, real estate, transportation and logistics, hospitality, agriculture, and other industries.

### Age Distribution

The study deliberately recruited across a wide generational spectrum, ensuring representation from early-career managers through late-career senior executives. Respondents ranged in age from 25 to 65, with the following approximate distribution:

25–29 (Gen Z)	16%
30–44 (Millennials)	34%
45–59 (Gen X)	32%
60–65 (Boomers)	18%

## Organizational Size

Respondents represented organizations of all sizes: 28% from small organizations (under 100 employees), 31% from mid-size organizations (100–1,000 employees), 26% from large organizations (1,000–10,000 employees), and 15% from enterprise-scale organizations (over 10,000 employees). This distribution was intentional, as disruption and transformation challenges differ materially across organizational size categories.

## Leadership Level

Respondents spanned a full range of leadership levels: C-suite / Executive (18%), Senior Vice President / Vice President (22%), Director (25%), Manager / Team Lead (28%), and individual contributors in leadership-adjacent roles (7%). This breadth of representation allows for analysis of how disruption is perceived and addressed differently across organizational hierarchies — a dimension that proved significant throughout the findings.

## Key Findings at a Glance

The following statistics represent the most significant and actionable findings from the Leading Through Disruption 2026 study. Full analysis and context for each finding is presented in the relevant section of the report.

### DISRUPTION & UNCERTAINTY

'Persistently uncertain' operating environment	78%
Disruption increasing in frequency and intensity	71%
Uncertainty as 'greatest strategic challenge' in 2026	64%
Leaders not confident in org's disruption readiness	66%

### ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

Actively engaged in a major transformation initiative	69%
Transformations 'taking longer than expected'	73%
Orgs with clear transformation strategy outperform peers	58%
Culture cited as primary transformation barrier	61%

LEADERSHIP & CLARITY

'Leading with clarity' as most valued leadership capability	71%
Leaders who communicate change rationale see higher trust	82%
Employees need more clarity from leaders during change	74%
Consistent communication tied to faster change adoption	67%

ADAPTABILITY & RESILIENCE

High-adaptability orgs outperform on retention	63%
Resilience viewed as a learned capability, not a fixed trait	69%
Psychological safety critical to adaptive performance	77%
Orgs investing in resilience infrastructure see faster recovery	56%

## Section I: The Disruption Landscape in 2026

To understand how organizations are responding to change, transformation, and disruption, we must first understand the landscape in which leaders find themselves operating. In 2026, that landscape is defined by a convergence of forces that individually would be challenging to navigate; collectively, they represent a magnitude of complexity that few organizational frameworks were designed to accommodate.

### The New Normal Is Abnormal

Perhaps the most striking finding from this study is the degree to which organizational leaders have abandoned any expectation of stability returning. In prior generations, disruption was understood as a temporary departure from equilibrium — an external shock that, once absorbed, would allow organizations to return to some form of steady state. That mental model has been fundamentally dismantled.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents described their operating environment as 'persistently uncertain' — a category that was not even offered in similar studies conducted just three years earlier. When asked to characterize the dominant texture of their strategic environment, only 12% chose 'stable with periodic disruption.' The remaining majority selected either 'continuously shifting' (44%) or 'fundamentally transformed from prior norms' (34%).

We stopped waiting for things to settle. We realized that waiting was itself a strategic failure.

— Brian C., CEO, Technology Sector

### Forces Driving Disruption in 2026

Respondents were asked to identify the primary forces driving disruption in their organizations. The responses reveal a multi-layered disruption environment in which technological, human, economic, and structural forces interact in complex and often unpredictable ways.

Technological acceleration and AI integration	84%
Workforce transformation and talent landscape shifts	76%
Economic uncertainty and market volatility	71%

Regulatory and compliance complexity	58%
Competitive landscape disruption	53%
Climate and environmental pressures	47%
Geopolitical and macroeconomic instability	43%
Customer and stakeholder expectation shifts	41%

Notably, technological acceleration — and specifically the accelerating integration of artificial intelligence across business functions — was identified as a primary driver by more than four in five respondents. This figure has increased substantially since comparable studies in 2023 and 2024, suggesting that AI-driven disruption has moved from a concern on the horizon to a present-tense organizational reality.

### Disruption by Organizational Size

How disruption is experienced varies significantly by organizational size. Larger organizations report experiencing disruption earlier but adapting more slowly — a paradox that reflects the structural friction inherent in complex organizational systems. Mid-size organizations, by contrast, often reported experiencing the greatest intensity of competitive disruption, squeezed between the resource advantages of large enterprises and the agility advantages of small competitors.

Small organizations (under 100 employees) reported the highest overall levels of adaptive confidence despite their relative resource constraints. Forty-one percent of small-organization respondents indicated they were 'very confident' in their ability to pivot quickly in response to disruption — compared to just 19% among respondents from enterprise-scale organizations. This disparity underscores a fundamental tension: the organizations with the most resources to invest in transformation are often the least capable of executing it quickly.

### The Cognitive Load of Constant Disruption

Beyond strategic and operational impact, respondents were candid about the psychological dimensions of operating in a state of sustained disruption. Sixty-seven percent reported experiencing some form of 'change fatigue' — a condition characterized by diminished capacity to engage with new initiatives, increased cynicism toward organizational change communications, and a generalized sense of exhaustion related to the pace of organizational evolution.

Change fatigue was most pronounced among mid-level managers — a population that occupies a uniquely difficult position in organizational hierarchies during transformation. Mid-level managers are

simultaneously responsible for translating strategic change directives from senior leadership into operational reality for their teams, while managing the concerns, resistance, and uncertainty of the people they lead. This structural position, combined with the pace of contemporary disruption, creates a disproportionate cognitive and emotional burden.

My job used to be to implement strategy. Now my job is to manage anxiety — my own, my team's, and my organization's — while also trying to implement strategy.

— Kristen L., Director of Operations, Healthcare Sector

## Reframing the Disruption Narrative

A meaningful minority of respondents — approximately 22% — demonstrated a qualitatively different relationship with the current environment. Rather than describing disruption as a threat to be managed, these leaders framed it as a context that revealed organizational capability, tested assumptions, and created opportunity for those willing and able to move decisively.

This reframing is not merely attitudinal — it correlates strongly with measurable organizational outcomes. Organizations led by individuals who score highest on our Disruption Orientation Scale (a composite measure of disruption-positive framing, proactive response behavior, and adaptive learning) demonstrate statistically significant outperformance on key metrics including revenue growth, employee engagement, and innovation rate.

### The Disruption-Ready Leader: Defining Characteristics

- Frames uncertainty as information rather than threat
- Maintains strategic clarity while holding tactical flexibility
- Communicates with transparency about what is known, unknown, and evolving
- Invests in team resilience and adaptive capacity alongside task performance
- Makes decisions with sufficient — not perfect — information
- Treats setbacks as learning data rather than failure signals

## Section II: Harnessing Uncertainty as a Strategic Asset

---

Uncertainty has long been treated as an organizational liability — something to be minimized, hedged against, and resolved as quickly as possible. The findings of this study challenge that framing fundamentally. In an environment where uncertainty is structural rather than episodic, organizations that treat it as a permanent liability are perpetually reactive. Organizations that learn to harness uncertainty — to extract strategic signal from noise, to act with confidence in the absence of certainty, and to build systems capable of operating fluidly under ambiguity — demonstrate markedly superior adaptive performance.

### The Uncertainty Paradox

One of the most revealing tensions to emerge from our research is what we call the Uncertainty Paradox: the leaders most capable of performing well under uncertainty are those who have spent the least energy trying to eliminate it. This counterintuitive finding reflects a deeper truth about the nature of complex adaptive environments — in systems characterized by genuine uncertainty, the pursuit of false certainty is more dangerous than operating with acknowledged ambiguity.

Sixty-four percent of respondents identified uncertainty as their organization's greatest strategic challenge in 2026. Yet when asked what their primary response to uncertainty has been, only 29% cited strategies oriented toward adapting within uncertainty (scenario planning, option development, iterative strategy). The majority — 51% — cited efforts to resolve or reduce uncertainty (more information gathering, extended analysis, delayed decision-making). A significant 20% reported essentially waiting for clarity before acting.

The performance data is unambiguous: organizations that adapt within uncertainty significantly outperform those that attempt to resolve it before acting. The cost of delayed action in high-velocity environments is, in many cases, greater than the cost of imperfect action. This is one of the clearest and most consequential findings in our data set.

### From Uncertainty Tolerance to Uncertainty Intelligence

Leading organizations in our study have moved beyond the concept of 'uncertainty tolerance' — a framing that implies uncertainty is an uncomfortable condition to be endured — toward what we term Uncertainty Intelligence: the active, skilled use of ambiguous and incomplete information as strategic input.

Uncertainty Intelligence comprises four capabilities that our research identifies as both distinct and measurable:

- **Signal Detection:** The capacity to identify meaningful patterns within noise — to distinguish signals of genuine strategic significance from the overwhelming volume of data, events, and communications that characterize the contemporary organizational environment.
- **Cognitive Flexibility:** The ability to hold multiple interpretive frameworks simultaneously, to update beliefs efficiently in response to new information, and to resist premature closure on strategic interpretations.
- **Confident Ambiguity:** The leadership capacity to project clarity and direction while being transparent about what remains uncertain or unknown — what one respondent described as 'knowing what you know, knowing what you don't, and being honest about both.'
- **Adaptive Decisioning:** The organizational capacity to make high-quality decisions with incomplete information, calibrated to the velocity and reversibility of the decision at hand.

The best leaders I've seen don't try to give their teams false certainty. They give them a clear direction and honest acknowledgment of what we don't yet know. That combination builds more trust than any false confidence could.

— Colleen T., Chief People Officer, Financial Services

### Building Organizational Uncertainty Intelligence

When respondents were asked what their organizations have done to build capacity for operating under uncertainty, the most frequently cited interventions were: scenario planning exercises (47%), leadership development programs addressing uncertainty and ambiguity (39%), restructuring decision rights to enable faster action with less escalation (31%), and creating formal 'learning loops' to accelerate sense-making after disruptions (28%).

Notably, organizations that had implemented three or more of these interventions demonstrated significantly higher scores on our Adaptive Performance Index — a composite measure of organizational responsiveness, innovation output, and change success rate. This suggests that building uncertainty intelligence is an investable organizational capability, not simply a function of leadership temperament.

## Section III: Navigating Change and Organizational Transformation

Sixty-nine percent of respondents reported that their organization is currently engaged in at least one major transformation initiative. This figure — already striking — understates the full scope of change underway: a significant proportion of respondents reported that their organizations are managing two or more concurrent transformations. In this environment, transformation is no longer an exceptional program. It is an ongoing state of organizational being.

### The Anatomy of Transformation in 2026

When asked to characterize the nature of the transformation their organizations are currently undertaking, respondents identified a diverse range of transformations in progress, with many organizations undergoing multiple types simultaneously:

Digital and technology transformation	74%
Cultural and behavioral transformation	61%
Operating model and structural reorganization	54%
Workforce and talent strategy transformation	51%
Customer experience and service model transformation	43%
Business model and revenue stream transformation	38%
Environmental and sustainability transformation	29%

### Execution Inertia

Perhaps the most consequential finding in this section is the persistent gap between transformation intent and transformation execution. While nearly seven in ten organizations report active transformation efforts, the rate of successful completion — defined as achieving stated objectives on or near the intended timeline — remains stubbornly low. Seventy-three percent of respondents report that their current or most recent transformation initiative is taking longer than originally anticipated. Fifty-eight percent report that the initiative's scope has expanded beyond initial parameters. And forty-four percent report significant resistance from within the organization as a primary barrier to progress.

These findings are consistent with widely cited research on transformation failure rates — and yet, year after year, organizations continue to initiate transformations with the same structural vulnerabilities. The research surfaced a set of recurring barriers that account for the majority of transformation execution failures:

- **Cultural friction:** Organizational cultures that evolved to optimize for stability actively resist the behavioral changes required by transformation. This was the most cited barrier across all respondent groups.
- **Leadership capacity gaps:** Transformations are frequently designed and resourced at the strategic level but fail at the execution level due to insufficient leadership development investment.
- **Communication failures:** Ambiguous, infrequent, or inconsistent communication about the rationale, scope, and progress of transformation initiatives breeds uncertainty, rumor, and active resistance.
- **Change fatigue:** In organizations managing multiple concurrent transformations, employees and managers reach a point of saturation in which new change initiatives are greeted with skepticism or disengagement.
- **Inadequate stabilization:** Transformations frequently end before the new behaviors, systems, and norms have been sufficiently reinforced and stabilized, leading to regression toward prior ways of working.

**We are excellent at launching transformations. We have not yet mastered completing them.**

— Derek G., Director of Growth, Retail Sector

## What High-Performing Transformation Organizations Do Differently

Despite the challenges outlined above, a meaningful subset of respondents — those whose organizations have achieved above-average transformation success rates — demonstrated several distinguishing practices that correlate strongly with better outcomes.

High-performing transformation organizations are significantly more likely to: invest in change management capability as a permanent organizational competency (rather than a project-specific add-on), designate explicit transformation leadership roles with clear authority and accountability, build feedback mechanisms that allow real-time course correction during transformation, and engage employees at multiple levels as active participants in transformation design rather than passive recipients of change.

Most critically, organizations that achieve above-average transformation outcomes invest in leader development specifically focused on the human dimensions of change — building the empathy,

communication capacity, and psychological acuity that leaders need to guide people through the disorientation and uncertainty of sustained transformation.

## Section IV: Embracing Disruption — From Threat to Catalyst

---

The prevailing organizational posture toward disruption has historically been defensive: anticipate it, minimize exposure to it, recover from it as quickly as possible. This defensive posture made intuitive sense in environments where disruption was a periodic departure from normative conditions. In 2026, where disruption is a persistent feature of the operating environment, a defensive posture is no longer strategically sufficient.

A growing cadre of organizations in our study has adopted a fundamentally different stance — one that treats disruption not as a threat to be managed but as a catalyst to be activated. These organizations actively seek to generate disruption within their own industries before external forces disrupt them. They treat disruptive forces as sources of strategic intelligence. And they build the internal capabilities necessary to move faster than their competitors when disruption reshapes the competitive landscape.

### The Disruption Orientation Spectrum

Our research identified a Disruption Orientation Spectrum along which organizations can be meaningfully located. The spectrum comprises four orientations, each with distinct strategic implications:

- **Resistant:** Organizations that actively resist disruption, defending existing business models, processes, and cultural norms against disruptive forces. These organizations demonstrate the highest short-term stability but the lowest long-term adaptive success rate.
- **Reactive:** Organizations that respond to disruption after its impact becomes undeniable. The majority of study respondents' organizations fall into this category — they are not resistant to change but are consistently behind the disruption curve.
- **Responsive:** Organizations with structured mechanisms for identifying disruption early and mounting organized responses before competitive disadvantage becomes critical. These organizations demonstrate above-average transformation success rates.
- **Generative:** Organizations that actively participate in creating disruption in their industries, leveraging their understanding of emerging forces to redefine competitive parameters. These organizations demonstrate the highest innovation output and long-term adaptive performance.

When respondents categorized their own organizations, only 11% placed themselves in the Generative category, while 46% identified as Reactive. This distribution suggests a significant opportunity for most organizations to move along the spectrum — a movement that requires deliberate investment in sensing capabilities, leadership mindset, and organizational design.

## Disruption as Competitive Intelligence

Organizations that treat disruption as catalytic rather than threatening develop distinctive practices for converting disruption signals into competitive intelligence. These practices include: systematic environmental scanning designed to surface weak signals before they become strong disruptions; structured competitor and adjacent-industry analysis to understand how disruptive forces are reshaping competitive dynamics; and customer and stakeholder listening programs that reveal shifting expectations before they manifest as lost market share.

Our competitors are terrified of what's coming. We're grateful for it. Every disruption we navigate well increases our distance from the organizations that tried to avoid the same disruption.

— Lisa G., SVP Strategy, Technology Sector

## Section V: Building the Adaptable Organization

---

If the defining challenge of 2026 is navigating sustained disruption, then the defining organizational imperative is building the structural, cultural, and human infrastructure required to adapt continuously and effectively. This is not a onetime redesign effort — it is an ongoing commitment to developing what we term Organizational Adaptability: the composite capacity to sense change, interpret its implications, align resources and attention in response, and execute new behaviors at the required pace.

### The Organizational Adaptability Index

To assess organizational adaptability, we developed the Organizational Adaptability Index (OAI) — a composite measure incorporating six dimensions identified through both primary research and analysis of existing organizational effectiveness literature. The six dimensions are:

- Sensing Capability: The organization's ability to detect relevant changes in its environment before they become crisis-level events
- Strategic Agility: The ability to adjust strategic direction quickly and coherently without organizational whiplash
- Structural Flexibility: The degree to which organizational structures, decision rights, and processes can be reconfigured in response to changing conditions
- Cultural Openness: The extent to which organizational culture supports experimentation, learning from failure, and behavioral change
- Human Adaptive Capacity: The investment in developing leaders and employees who can perform effectively under conditions of change and uncertainty
- Learning Velocity: The speed at which the organization converts experience — including failure — into improved organizational knowledge and practice

Organizations scoring in the top quartile of the OAI outperform those in the bottom quartile across every performance metric examined: revenue growth, employee engagement, customer satisfaction, innovation rate, and talent retention. The performance differential is not marginal — in several metrics, top-quartile organizations demonstrate two to three times the performance levels of bottom-quartile organizations.

### What Adaptable Organizations Do Differently

Our data reveals several structural and cultural practices that reliably differentiate high-adaptability organizations from their peers:

### Distributed Decision-Making

High-adaptability organizations have deliberately restructured decision rights to push consequential decisions closer to the point of customer or operational contact. Rather than centralizing decision-making at the top of organizational hierarchies — a design that may have been efficient in stable environments but creates fatal delays in high-velocity ones — these organizations invest in developing judgment at multiple levels and providing the information, context, and empowerment necessary for effective decision-making.

### Experimentation Infrastructure

Adaptable organizations do not merely tolerate experimentation — they have built systematic infrastructure to support it. This includes dedicated innovation budgets that persist through financial cycles, protected time and space for exploratory work, explicit processes for evaluating and scaling successful experiments, and — critically — explicit processes for learning from and not penalizing unsuccessful ones.

### Adaptive Culture as a Leadership Priority

Sixty-one percent of respondents identified organizational culture as the primary barrier to transformation success. High-OAI organizations have taken culture seriously as a strategic priority, investing explicitly in the cultural norms, leadership behaviors, and talent practices necessary to make adaptability a lived organizational reality rather than an aspirational statement.

Adaptability is not a trait your organization either has or doesn't have. It is a set of capabilities you build deliberately, invest in consistently, and protect when things get hard.

— Allen A., Director of Development, Healthcare

## Section VI: Leading with Clarity Amid Constant Reinvention

---

In a survey environment that surfaced an enormous diversity of opinion across age groups, industries, leadership levels, and organizational contexts, one finding achieved a degree of consensus that was, itself, remarkable: when asked to name the single most important leadership capability in a high-disruption, high-uncertainty environment, 71% of all respondents identified some variant of 'leading with clarity.'

This finding is both straightforward and deeply instructive. In environments characterized by continuous change, ambiguity, and competing signals, the human need for clarity — for understanding where we are going, why we are going there, and what my role is in getting there — becomes intensified rather than diminished. The leaders who are perceived as most effective in disruption-heavy environments are not necessarily those with the most sophisticated strategic frameworks or the deepest technical expertise. They are those who communicate with consistency, transparency, and intention.

### What Leaders Mean by 'Clarity'

Our qualitative data reveals important nuance in what respondents mean when they invoke clarity as a leadership virtue. Clarity is not, according to our respondents, the same as certainty. Leaders who project false certainty — who communicate definitive answers to questions that are genuinely unresolved — are explicitly distrusted by the people they lead. What respondents describe as clarity is better understood as coherent, honest, and contextually appropriate communication across four dimensions:

- **Directional Clarity:** A clear and consistently communicated sense of where the organization is headed — not necessarily with precision about every step, but with conviction about direction and purpose.
- **Contextual Clarity:** Honest communication about why the organization is facing the changes it is facing — the forces driving transformation, the stakes involved, and the strategic logic underlying key decisions.
- **Role Clarity:** Clear communication to individuals and teams about how their work connects to broader organizational priorities — especially during periods when structure, accountabilities, and processes are in flux.
- **Process Clarity:** Transparency about how decisions are being made, what information is available, what is not yet known, and what the organization will do when circumstances change.

Leaders who communicate across all four dimensions are significantly more likely to be rated as effective by their teams, to maintain high engagement during transformation, and to achieve their stated transformation outcomes on time.

## The Trust Dividend of Clear Leadership

Our data reveals a powerful trust dynamic at work in high-disruption environments: leaders who communicate with honesty about uncertainty — who acknowledge what they do not know even as they project confidence about direction — generate substantially higher levels of trust than leaders who project false confidence.

Eighty-two percent of respondents who reported that their leader communicates honestly about both what is known and what is not yet known rated that leader as highly trustworthy. By contrast, only 31% of respondents whose leaders project certainty during periods of genuine uncertainty rated those leaders as highly trustworthy. The data is clear: people do not need their leaders to have all the answers. They need them to be honest about which answers they have.

My team doesn't expect me to have a crystal ball. They expect me to be straight with them. When I tell them what I know and what I don't know, and what we're going to do about it — that's when they lean in.

— Ross B., VP of Operations, Energy Sector

## Communication Frequency and Change Adoption

One of the more practically useful findings in this section concerns the relationship between communication frequency and the speed of change adoption. Organizations in which leaders communicate proactively and consistently about ongoing change initiatives — rather than communicating primarily at change launch and then only when problems arise — achieve significantly faster adoption of new behaviors and processes. Sixty-seven percent of respondents from high-communication organizations report that their teams reach the 'effective new state' in half the time or less compared to prior change cycles. By contrast, respondents from organizations with infrequent or reactive change communication are significantly more likely to report persistent resistance and partial adoption as outcomes.

## Section VII: Resilience as Organizational Infrastructure

---

Resilience — once understood as the capacity to recover from adversity — has been fundamentally redefined by the operating conditions of 2026. In an environment characterized by persistent disruption rather than episodic setbacks, the relevant question is no longer 'How quickly can we bounce back?' but rather 'How effectively can we absorb, adapt, and continue evolving under ongoing stress?' This shift in conception has profound implications for how organizations build and invest in resilience.

### From Bounce-Back to Bounce-Forward

The traditional 'bounce-back' conception of resilience — the capacity to return to a prior state of performance or equilibrium following a disruption — has been recognized by many organizational researchers as inadequate for characterizing effective responses to the type of sustained, multi-directional disruption that characterizes the current environment. Several resilience researchers have advanced the concept of 'bounce-forward' resilience: the capacity not merely to return to prior states but to leverage disruption as an occasion for learning, adaptation, and enhanced performance.

This distinction resonated strongly with our research participants. Sixty-nine percent of respondents characterized resilience as a learned, developable capability rather than a fixed organizational trait — a significant finding that undermines fatalistic narratives about resilience as something organizations simply have or don't have. This framing opens the door to a more intentional, investable approach to building organizational resilience.

### The Five Dimensions of Organizational Resilience

Based on our research data and analysis, we identify five dimensions of organizational resilience that together constitute what we term Resilience Infrastructure — the systemic investment in the capabilities, relationships, and practices that allow organizations to perform effectively under sustained adversity.

- **Anticipatory Resilience:** The capacity to foresee potential disruptions and proactively build organizational buffers — strategic reserves, redundant capabilities, and alternative operational pathways — that reduce vulnerability.
- **Absorptive Resilience:** The ability to absorb the immediate impact of disruptive events without catastrophic system failure — maintaining operational continuity, sustaining critical relationships, and preventing panic-driven decisions.
- **Adaptive Resilience:** The capacity to modify organizational behaviors, structures, and strategies in real time as the nature and scale of disruption becomes clear.
- **Restorative Resilience:** The ability to stabilize and restore effective functioning following acute disruption — with attention not only to operational recovery but to the psychological and relational dimensions of organizational recovery.

- Generative Resilience: The capacity to extract learning and improvement from disruptive experience — to use adversity as data, and to emerge from disruption with enhanced capabilities for future challenges.

## Resilience and Psychological Safety

One of the most robust findings in this section is the strong relationship between psychological safety and organizational resilience. Organizations that score in the top quartile of psychological safety — defined as the degree to which employees feel safe to speak up, challenge assumptions, report problems, and take intelligent risks without fear of disproportionate negative consequences — demonstrate significantly higher resilience across all five dimensions.

Seventy-seven percent of respondents identified psychological safety as either 'critical' or 'very important' to adaptive performance under disruption. Yet when asked whether their organizations actively invest in building psychological safety as a leadership practice, only 38% answered in the affirmative. This gap between recognition and investment represents one of the most accessible and high-impact opportunities identified in our research.

Resilience doesn't come from telling people to be strong. It comes from building an environment where people feel safe enough to be honest about what's hard — and supported enough to keep going.

— Jessica M., Executive Director, Nonprofit Sector

## Section VIII: The Human Dimension of Disruption

---

Much of the organizational discourse around disruption and transformation is, understandably, oriented toward the strategic and structural dimensions of organizational change. Transformation is discussed in terms of market positioning, technology architecture, operating model design, and financial performance. What is frequently underweighted — and consistently underinvested — is the human dimension of disruption: the ways in which sustained organizational change affects the psychological, relational, and motivational experience of the people who are living through it.

Our research makes a compelling case that the human dimension is not a secondary consideration in organizational transformation — it is, in many cases, the primary determinant of transformation success or failure.

### The Emotional Architecture of Change

Sustained organizational disruption produces a distinctive emotional architecture — a pattern of psychological responses that, when not acknowledged and addressed, become active barriers to transformation. The most common emotional responses reported by our respondents included uncertainty and anxiety (reported by 73%), fatigue and overwhelm (67%), grief and loss related to prior organizational identities and ways of working (44%), and — notably — excitement and opportunity (52%). The co-presence of both anxiety and excitement in a majority of respondents reflects the fundamentally ambivalent nature of organizational transformation: it is simultaneously threatening and generative.

Organizations that acknowledge and actively work with the emotional architecture of change — rather than expecting employees to set their emotional responses aside and focus on execution — demonstrate measurably better transformation outcomes. This is not merely a humanistic argument, though the humanistic argument stands on its own. It is a strategic one: unacknowledged emotional resistance to change is one of the primary drivers of transformation failure.

### Generational Dimensions of Disruption Experience

One of the most instructive dimensions of our research is the variation in how different generational cohorts experience and respond to organizational disruption. While caution is warranted against overgeneralizing generational differences — there is substantial variation within generations, and many individual factors are more predictive than birth cohort — meaningful patterns emerged that have practical implications for leadership.

Younger respondents (25–34) were significantly more likely to frame disruption as an expected and even welcome feature of organizational life. They demonstrated higher tolerance for ambiguity, stronger preference for organizational flexibility, and greater comfort with rapid change — but also higher

sensitivity to perceived authenticity in leadership and lower tolerance for organizational behavior they perceive as inconsistent with stated values.

Mid-career respondents (35–54) demonstrated the highest levels of transformation execution capacity — the combination of experience, organizational knowledge, and leadership skill required to actually move organizations through complex change. They also reported the highest levels of change fatigue and expressed the strongest desire for strategic stability even while acknowledging the necessity of transformation.

Senior respondents (55–65) showed the greatest range of disruption orientation — from individuals who demonstrated exceptional adaptability grounded in deep organizational wisdom, to those whose extended experience with previous organizational environments created the strongest resistance to fundamental transformation. This diversity within the cohort suggests that chronological age is a poor predictor of disruption readiness, and that engagement strategies for this population must be individually calibrated.

## Section IX: Technology, AI, and the Transformation Imperative

No discussion of organizational disruption in 2026 can be complete without examining the role of technology — and specifically, the accelerating integration of artificial intelligence across organizational functions. The data is unambiguous: AI is the most cited driver of disruption in our study, and it is producing a distinctive set of leadership challenges that existing frameworks are only partially equipped to address.

### The AI Integration Inflection Point

Our data suggests that 2025–2026 represents an inflection point in AI integration: the moment at which AI-driven transformation has moved from a strategic priority discussed in boardrooms to an operational reality reshaping day-to-day work across functions and industries. Eighty-four percent of respondents identified AI as a primary disruption driver. More tellingly, 61% reported that AI has materially changed the nature of at least some work performed in their organizations within the past 12 months.

This pace of change is producing both significant opportunity and significant anxiety. Leaders report that AI creates compelling productivity, decision-support, and innovation potential. They also report that the speed of AI integration frequently outpaces their organizations' capacity to build the governance, culture, and human development infrastructure necessary to capture that potential responsibly and equitably.

### Human-AI Collaboration as a Leadership Imperative

One of the most significant leadership imperatives to emerge from the AI integration trend is the challenge of building effective human-AI collaboration — not merely deploying AI tools, but developing the organizational norms, skill sets, and work design approaches that allow humans and AI systems to complement each other's capabilities effectively.

Respondents who report high levels of effective human-AI collaboration in their organizations share several distinguishing characteristics: they have invested explicitly in workforce AI literacy, they have established clear governance frameworks for AI use, they have been transparent with employees about how AI will and will not affect their roles, and they have actively involved frontline employees in the design of AI-augmented workflows rather than designing AI deployments at the top and implementing them downward.

The organizations that are winning with AI are the ones that figured out how to prepare their people to work alongside those models.

— Mike L., CTO, Professional Services Firm

## Technology-Driven Disruption and Workforce Anxiety

AI-driven transformation is producing levels of workforce anxiety that represent a significant leadership and organizational challenge. Fifty-nine percent of respondents reported some level of concern among their employees about AI's impact on job security, role relevance, or career trajectories. Forty-one percent reported that this anxiety is currently having a measurable negative impact on productivity, engagement, or willingness to adopt new AI-enabled tools and processes.

Organizations that have effectively addressed workforce anxiety related to AI share a common approach: they lead with transparency, they invest proactively in reskilling and upskilling, they involve employees in defining how AI will be used in their work, and they commit explicitly to a 'humans-first' philosophy that treats AI as a tool in service of human potential rather than a replacement for it.

## Section X: Industry Perspectives and Sector Variation

---

While the broad themes of this report resonate across industries, the specific texture of disruption, the urgency of transformation priorities, and the nature of leadership challenges vary meaningfully by sector. The following sector-specific snapshots are drawn from the most heavily represented industries in our study and are presented to illuminate the contextual variation that underlies the aggregate findings.

### Technology and Software

Respondents from the technology sector demonstrate the highest overall disruption orientation scores and the greatest comfort with ambiguity — reflecting the sector's historical relationship with rapid change. However, they also report the highest rates of change fatigue among mid-level managers, suggesting that even disruption-native organizations face real limits on the pace of sustainable transformation. The primary concern among technology leaders is less about AI's disruptive potential and more about maintaining organizational coherence during the transition to AI-first operating models.

### Healthcare and Life Sciences

Healthcare respondents present a distinctive profile: high awareness of the need for transformation, strong institutional resistance to it, and an acute sense of the human stakes involved in both moving too quickly and moving too slowly. Regulatory complexity, workforce burnout, and the particular challenges of leading change in organizations where patient safety is always the paramount consideration create a uniquely demanding transformation environment. Healthcare leaders ranked psychological safety, leadership clarity, and trust as their three most critical leadership priorities in the current period — higher than any other sector in our study.

### Financial Services

Financial services respondents are navigating a particularly complex form of disruption: the intersection of technology transformation (including AI, digital assets, and platform-based financial services), regulatory evolution, and profound shifts in customer expectations and behavior. Many respondents from this sector described experiencing the simultaneous pressure to modernize rapidly and to maintain the stability and trust that define their value proposition. This tension is producing a distinctive form of organizational ambivalence that requires particularly skilled leadership to navigate.

### Education

Education sector respondents — representing K-12, higher education, and professional education organizations — report perhaps the most fundamental questioning of organizational mission and model in the current period. The convergence of demographic shifts, AI's disruption of learning and credentialing, financial sustainability pressures, and evolving employer and student expectations is producing conditions

that many respondents describe as an existential transformation challenge rather than an incremental adaptation challenge. Leaders in this sector demonstrate high resilience and deep commitment to mission, paired with significant uncertainty about how to lead transformation at the scale and speed the environment demands.

## Manufacturing

Manufacturing leaders are navigating disruption on multiple fronts simultaneously: supply chain reconfiguration, automation and robotics integration, workforce transformation, and sustainability mandates. Respondents from this sector demonstrate pragmatic, execution-oriented approaches to transformation — a reflection of the sector's operational culture. The primary concern expressed by manufacturing leaders is not the clarity of transformation strategy but the availability of the human capabilities required to execute it: leaders with the change management, digital fluency, and people development skills that modern manufacturing transformation demands.

## Section XI: Recommendations for Leaders

---

The following recommendations represent the most actionable insights distilled from the Leading Through Disruption 2026 research findings. They are intended for organizational leaders and managers who are seeking to navigate the current environment with greater effectiveness, build more adaptable and resilient organizations, and develop the leadership capabilities their contexts demand.

### 1. Reframe Your Relationship with Uncertainty

Move from uncertainty as a problem to be solved to uncertainty as a condition to be navigated skillfully. Invest in developing Uncertainty Intelligence at the leadership level: build scenario planning capabilities, create formal learning loops, and design decision processes calibrated to the velocity and reversibility of the decisions at hand. Recognize that the cost of waiting for certainty in high-velocity environments is frequently greater than the cost of acting with imperfect information.

### 2. Overcome Execution Inertia

Commit to transformation execution with the same rigor you apply to transformation design. Address the known barriers: cultural friction, leadership capacity gaps, communication failures, and change fatigue. Build permanent change management capability rather than project-specific capacity. Designate transformation leadership roles with real authority and accountability. Create feedback mechanisms that allow real-time course correction — and use them.

### 3. Lead with Clarity — Not Certainty

Develop and consistently practice the four dimensions of leadership clarity: directional, contextual, role, and process clarity. Be transparent about what you know, what you don't know, and what you are going to do about it. Invest in communication frequency during periods of transformation — the data is unambiguous that consistent, honest communication drives faster adoption, higher trust, and better outcomes.

### 4. Build Adaptability as Organizational Infrastructure

Treat organizational adaptability not as a cultural aspiration but as an investable set of capabilities. Assess your current performance on the six dimensions of the Organizational Adaptability Index. Identify your most significant gap areas and develop targeted improvement plans. Recognize that structural changes — distributed decision rights, experimentation infrastructure, learning systems — are as important as cultural ones.

## 5. Invest in Resilience Before You Need It

Build resilience infrastructure proactively rather than reactively. Invest in psychological safety as a leadership practice — the data on its relationship to adaptive performance is robust and consistent. Develop all five dimensions of organizational resilience, with particular attention to Generative Resilience: the capacity to extract learning and improvement from adversity. Recognize that resilience is a learned capability and invest accordingly.

## 6. Attend to the Human Dimension of Disruption

Develop explicit strategies for the emotional and psychological dimensions of transformation — not as a peripheral concern but as a strategic priority. Acknowledge the emotional architecture of change: the co-presence of anxiety, fatigue, grief, and excitement that characterizes sustained transformation. Train leaders to recognize, name, and respond to these dimensions of organizational experience. Recognize that unacknowledged emotional resistance is one of the primary drivers of transformation failure.

## 7. Lead Your AI Transformation with a Humans-First Philosophy

Approach AI integration as a human transformation challenge, not merely a technology deployment challenge. Invest in workforce AI literacy across all levels. Establish clear governance frameworks. Communicate transparently about how AI will and will not affect roles. Involve frontline employees in the design of AI-augmented workflows. Commit explicitly to a humans-first approach in which AI serves as a tool that amplifies human potential.

### A Final Word: The Leadership Imperative of 2026

- Disruption is not a problem to be solved — it is a context to be led within.
- The leaders who will define this era are those who combine strategic clarity with intellectual humility, decisiveness with genuine openness to new information, and personal resilience with deep care for the human experience of those they lead.
- This is demanding leadership. It is also, for those who rise to it, leadership at its most meaningful.
- The data in this report shows clearly that it is possible. The question for every leader reading this is simply: what are you going to build?

## Appendix A: Methodology

---

### Study Design

Leading Through Disruption 2026 employed a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative survey instruments with qualitative open-ended response prompts to produce both breadth of coverage and depth of understanding. The study was designed to be nationally representative of the U.S. organizational leadership population across industry, organizational size, geography, and demographic dimensions.

### Sampling Approach

Respondents were recruited via a stratified sampling approach designed to achieve target representation across industry sectors, organizational size categories, leadership levels, geographic regions, and demographic groups. A primary recruitment channel through a professionally maintained survey panel was supplemented by targeted outreach through industry associations, professional networks, and organizational partnerships. Quota management was applied throughout the data collection period to maintain representative distributions.

### Instruments

The survey instrument comprised five modules: (1) Organizational Context and Respondent Background; (2) Disruption Experience and Orientation; (3) Change and Transformation; (4) Leadership and Clarity; (5) Adaptability and Resilience. Composite indices including the Organizational Adaptability Index (OAI), the Disruption Orientation Scale (DOS), and the Adaptive Performance Index (API) were developed from scale items validated through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis.

### Data Quality

Multiple data quality controls were applied, including attention checks, response time monitoring, and duplicate detection. Respondents who failed two or more attention checks, completed the survey in under seven minutes, or were identified as duplicate responses were excluded from the final data set. Final data cleaning produced a valid sample of  $n = 2,047$  respondents.

### Limitations

As with all survey-based research, findings reflect self-reported perceptions and behaviors, which may differ from objective organizational realities. Social desirability bias may affect responses, particularly on items related to leadership effectiveness and organizational performance. Cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Sector-level findings for smaller industry categories should be interpreted with appropriate caution due to reduced sample sizes.

## Appendix B: Respondent Demographics

### Gender Identity

Male	52%
Female	41%
Non-binary / gender non-conforming	1%
Prefer not to say	6%

### Age Distribution

25–34	31%
35–44	24%
45–54	22%
55–60	15%
60–65	8%

### Geographic Coverage

Respondents were distributed across 48 U.S. states. The two states not represented in the final sample were excluded due to insufficient panel availability during the data collection window. The most heavily represented regions, in order, were the South Atlantic (17.4%), Pacific (15.8%), East North Central (13.2%), Middle Atlantic (12.7%), Mountain (9.1%), West South Central (8.6%), New England (7.9%), East South Central (6.8%), West North Central (6.3%), and Pacific Northwest (2.2%).

### Leadership Level

C-Suite / Executive (CEO, COO, CFO, etc.)	18%
Senior Vice President / Vice President	22%
Director	25%
Manager / Team Lead	28%
Other / Leadership-Adjacent	7%

## Organizational Size

Under 100 employees	28%
100–1,000 employees	31%
1,000–10,000 employees	26%
Over 10,000 employees	15%

## Appendix C: Survey Instrument Overview

---

The following provides a high-level overview of the survey instrument's structure and key topic areas. The full instrument is available upon request for qualified researchers and organizational partners.

### Module 1: Organizational Context and Respondent Background

Industry sector; organizational size and structure; leadership level and tenure; geographic location; workforce composition.

### Module 2: Disruption Experience and Orientation

Perceived disruption intensity and frequency; primary sources of disruption; disruption orientation (Disruption Orientation Scale); confidence in organizational disruption readiness; uncertainty management practices.

### Module 3: Change and Transformation

Current transformation initiatives; transformation outcomes and barriers; change management practices; communication and leadership during change; organizational change fatigue.

### Module 4: Leadership and Clarity

Most valued leadership capabilities; leader communication practices; trust and transparency; directional, contextual, role, and process clarity ratings; leadership development investments.

### Module 5: Adaptability and Resilience

Organizational Adaptability Index (OAI) items; psychological safety assessment; resilience practices; AI and technology integration; human dimensions of organizational change.